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Matthew Brannon

WHERE WERE WE
MARCH 28–AUGUST 26, 2007

Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria

WHITNEY MUSEUM AT ALTRIA

CHAPTER 11

Without attendant punctuation or context, Matthew Brannon's exhibition title *Where Were We* makes itself irreducible to a single interpretation. Its ambiguity and incompleteness as a phrase belies its seemingly reductive economy and alliterative simplicity. It points to a loss of bearings—uttered perhaps after an interruption in conversation, a regrettable shared experience, or a period of unconsciousness, during which we lost our expectation, register, or direction. A diversion has occurred.

Through the proliferation of speculative narratives stemming from this short indeterminate phrase, we are introduced to the nature of Brannon's artistic practice and strategies: even in the most simple and apparently vacated form, text and images are loaded with meanings that slide past and inform each other without ever fully fixing themselves or their associations. Intimated in these signifying operations is the specter of the psychological unconscious, which may be understood as being structured much like language and similarly discloses itself through jokes, slips, breakdowns, and unexpected ruptures.[1]

With a nuanced understanding of psychoanalytic theory, the artist juxtaposes image and text to bring the viewer into a play of associations between language and representation. At the same time, he has designed the exhibition to structure the viewer's visual experience around the act of reading and that which is revealed in the systems of pictures, narratives, objects, and space.

[OPPOSITE] *The Price of Admission*, 2007 (installation view). Matte PVC foil on glass, 316 x 131 in. (802.6 x 332.7 cm)

RESTRUCTURING

Brannon employs a signature combination of printed images, design strategies, and text in work that leverages the forms, visual currency, and circulation of promotional materials. The postcards, posters, and other ephemera that he creates at once announce the exhibition and comprise its formal elements, expanding the idea of what constitutes an exhibition to include all of its considered and diffuse material extensions. [2]

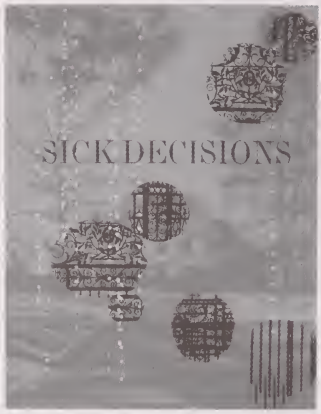
With *Where Were We*, the exhibition and the act of reading begin with the announcement and invitation, designed by the artist. The opening reception invitation, in the form of a letterpress "business card," and a poster are presented together in a custom envelope, evoking a bureaucratic aesthetic and formality. A provisional logo—a coiled black eel that is a recurring graphic motif in Brannon's work—lends the envelope and card a similar impression. The four-color poster unfolds to reveal a stark photograph of an anonymous urban office building "attached" to the page by a large trompe l'oeil paper clip, creating a representational play at hand with the metal clip actually holding the elements together. [3] Here we enter the realm of language.

The poster clearly cites the conventional information—the artist's name, the dates, location, and address of the exhibition. Where the image and exhibition credits are usually located, however, there are instead texts that simultaneously displace the announcement's authorship, function, and context. The photograph was taken by an artist (Michelle Elzay) other than Brannon and who otherwise has no presence in the exhibition; in the fine print typical of illustration captions, the text running along the left margin unexpectedly reveals itself as a short narrative:

Promotional poster for *Where Were We*, 2007. Offset print on paper, 22 x 17 in. (55.9 x 43.2 cm)

Above our heads the weight of a city block. Tons of poured cement. Miles of phone and electric. Enough glass to sink a ship. Palms, ferns, soft soap, calculators, vending machines, and fluorescent lighting. Picture one person at their desk. In the very center. Pen in mouth. Slight hangover. Answering a phone call they don't want to take.

Brannon demonstrates that in a determined form such as a promotional poster there remain spaces to inscribe content that transforms the reading of the object itself. Even the relationship of the promotional ephemera to the exhibition may be reconsidered: he typically invites artist friends to design his posters



featuring their own images, subverting the reading and expectations of the exhibition with their seemingly unrelated aesthetics and subject. Previous posters have been designed by Carol Bove, Liam Gillick, Wade Guyton, Patrick Hill, Sarah Morris, Richard Phillips, Lari Pittman, and Stephen Prina.

Throughout Brannon's oeuvre, the spaces he prefers to work with tend to be marginal or overlooked in relation to the overall form, yet through his manipulations they become integral to the piece's ongoing interpretation. This pattern began with earlier works, inspired by horror films, in which he explored the movie poster form. In the area traditionally reserved for production credits, he inserted instead short text and narrative

segments, as in *Sick Decisions* (2004) and *Grotesque Desperate* (2005). Sometimes Brannon's text completely overtakes the form and image, pointing to what may be happening behind the scenes as possibly the most revealing thing. An extreme example is Brannon's film *Unending Horrible* (2004), in which the scrolling introductory film credits (*"KNEEJERK NEGATIVITY WITH / GREAT WHITE SHARK HEART STUDIOS AND / SHIT FUN FILMS / PRESENTS / COLD GENITALS / IN A / NIGHTS SWEATS IDEA FOR"*) become the entirety of the work.[4]

From these invitation materials—a business card, a picture of an office building, and a reluctant employee—a scene is set for the exhibition.

[OPPOSITE LEFT] *Sick Decisions*, 2004. Screenprint on paper, 40 x 26 in. (55.9 x 66 cm)
[OPPOSITE RIGHT] *Grotesque Desperate*, 2005. Silkscreen on paper, 30 x 22 in. (76.2 x 55.88 cm)
[ABOVE] *Where Were We*, 2007 (installation view)

JFK International Airport

Steak Dinner

Raw Bar

[PAGE 8] *Signature*, 2007. Letterpress on paper, 38 x 29 in. (96.5 x 73.7 cm) [PAGE 9] *Who Takes Who Home Tonight*, 2007. Silkscreen on paper, two parts, 38 x 29 in. (96.5 x 73.7 cm) each [PAGE 10] *Steak Dinner*, 2007. Letterpress on paper, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm) [PAGE 11] *Raw Bar*, 2007. Letterpress on paper, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm) [ABOVE] *Pulling Out*, 2007. Letterpress on paper, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm)

MERGERS

Brannon cites as an ongoing reference Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), an epic poem eclipsed by convoluted annotations and eventually revealed as a novel whose form Nabokov has exploited to scrutinize and expand the genre.[5] Brannon similarly uses the form of the exhibition to describe a visual field of images and text through the language of printmaking, graphic and textile design, writing, and display. Against this backdrop, he explores the underlying psychologies inherent in the production, interpretation, and distribution of image-making.

Upon entering the exhibition space, viewers immediately discover the coiled black eel graphic first seen on the invitation, now in the form of a 26-foot-tall decal on the windows of the Whitney Museum at Altria's Sculpture Court, facing 42nd Street. The massive presence, stark black against muted gray concrete surroundings, here confounds its previous manifestation as an ad hoc graphic logo. With the addition of a title, *The Price of Admission* (2007), the piece attains a new, binary status as artwork and symbol. Viewable from both outside and inside the Whitney at Altria, a corporate building in the heart of midtown and the Times Square area, the eel takes on the promotional proportions of commercial street signage. For the artist, the eel continues to develop as a symbol of abjectness, refinement, and wealth—its conflicted meanings in contrast to its simple and alluring graphic manifestation. Brannon also relates the eel graphic to the image of a coiled whip, which he has employed in other works to evoke the psychological dynamics of power and domination.

The main gallery features three scaffoldlike display structures, designed by the artist and inspired by director's chairs (also a recurring symbol in Brannon's work), on which Brannon's framed letterpress and silkscreen prints are arranged in rows. A single gray wall matching the hues found in both the announcement poster and the exhibited prints serves as a cool, neutral background for the graphic black surfaces. The structures provide the support and spatial organization for the framed prints, creating what Brannon refers to as a "cadence" in viewing akin to reading pages arranged in chapters with no particular sequence.

A transitional moment occurs with the third display structure, which is fixed to the wall. Whereas the two freestanding structures have usurped the default display function of the gallery walls, this one has assimilated itself into the wall, creating an unusual doubling effect: a display surface supporting another display surface. These shifts in presentation, including the two works in the exhibition which are hung on the wall itself (*untitled*, 1993, and *Signature,* 2007), accentuate the varying contexts at play in the viewer's experience and interpretation of the exhibition.

MISCONDUCT

Psychoanalysis suggests that much of our fascination with image culture, including advertising, art, and cinema, is informed by the concept of cathexis—the ways we invest emotional energy in objects, ideas, or other people.

Brannon employs reflexive operations to explore how these psychological impulses can become overinvested and repressed, manifesting in such obsessive pathologies as megalomania, self-destruction, and perversion. He begins with a presentational

form, such as an exhibition and its promotional materials, graphic elements, objects, and publication. Then he introduces what he refers to as an "irritant," a disjunctive text/narrative or a formal/compositional aberration that displaces the interpretation of the work—sometimes overtaking it entirely. As we see here, such devices include inviting other artists to occupy his promotional posters and allowing his accompanying text (including titles) to commandeer the reading of his visual images.

Where Were We draws its initial contextual and visual narrative from its location in commercial midtown and the constructed imagery that Brannon presents. Each print in the exhibition features a simple graphic composition that evokes a generic and stylistically anachronistic iconography of corporate, commuter, and after-hours cosmopolitan lifestyles. The color palette is decorative and modern in flat, unmodulated colors and with a nostalgic Pop patina. *Steak Dinner* (2007) presents a deadpan arrangement of a limp yellow banana peel resting on top of a coffee mug, a luxury watch, and a pack of cigarettes; *Raw Bar* (2007) features a suggestive configuration of goods including a stiletto-heeled shoe, lowball glass, hotel key, and coat-check ticket.

With the addition of Brannon's fractured texts, what appear to be simple assortments of office stationery, commuter accoutrements, and luxury items and comestibles become loaded compositions detailing personality disorders, status anxiety, private transgressions, and other dysfunctions and trespasses. The text in *Pigs, Like Us* (2007) turns what could be a coffee-stained desktop strewn with pencils and an iPod into a tainted scene recounting spiraling self-indulgence and negligence. A large silkscreen diptych flatly depicting a sushi dinner is betrayed by its title, *Who Takes Who Home Tonight* (2007), which renders the tableau a disingenuous prelude to sexual indiscretion.

In the transition from the works on the display structures to the pieces on the gallery wall, formal abstraction appears in the work, creating a dramatic, schizophrenic foil for the hard-edged graphic figuration. Drawing from a canon of aesthetic abstraction including Expressionist mark-making (*untitled*, 1993), Optical art (*Signature*, 2007), and Geometric Minimalism (*Pigeon*, 2007), Brannon stages a slippery moment in which an artwork doubles as domestic decoration or an emblem of a lifestyle. This juxtaposition highlights our perception of "art" and the values we assign to certain aesthetics, display strategies, and modes of production. The twist is that all the prints in the exhibition are unique and made with the same methods, leveling expectations both of the endless reproducibility of poster works and of the privileging of one aesthetic over the other.

ACCOUNTABILITY

In *Where Were We*, a single voice is not apparent. Even within individual pieces the point of view is constantly shifting and ambiguous, conflating fragments of personal dialogue, anonymous verbal affronts, imaginary advertising copy, and narrative. Separated into short sentences and text segments, the story, like the images, relies on the viewer to string together words and phrases to form uniquely subjective associations and interpretations.

Pulling Out (2007) considers:

> A BIT AGGRESSIVE / WOULDN'T YOU SAY? / DIDN'T SEE THAT COMING / THE WAY HE SEEMED PREPARED TO ARGUE AT EVERY TURN / AND WHERE DID HE EVER GET THAT ABOUT YOU KNOW WHAT / SO ANGRY / SOMEWHAT LOST I FEAR / WORRIES ME THOUGH / IT'S AS IF HE'S DETERMINED TO DRAG US DOWN WITH HIM

Themes materialize and coalesce throughout Brannon's work as his constructions focus on the psychology of display and promotion in relation to power, ambition, art, and taste. In *Where Were We*, Brannon delineates an Everyman beset by job anxieties, material desires, and personal dysfunction—a typology especially salient in the context of the exhibition's corporate midtown location. At the same time, the text reveals an alternate voice that self-consciously speaks about the act of writing and artmaking—even addressing the viewer about the work itself. *Adult Education* (2007) contends:

> IT'S ABSTRACT / IT'S TOTALLY ABSTRACT / I COPIED IT / I STOLE IT FROM YOU / I RIPPED THE PAGE RIGHT OUT OF THE BOOK / WORD FOR WORD / YOU WEREN'T DOING MUCH WITH IT ANYWAY . . .

With the fusing of these narratives, the subject, form, and interpretation of the work are addressed all at once.

This series of identification and misrecognition is central to Brannon's text and image constructions, underlining the psychoanalytic and linguistic considerations of his work. Similar to the narrative voice, the implied reader is not fully determined but is revealed individually through the process of interpretation and inferences drawn.[6] By actively responding to the pieces, filling in visual and narrative gaps, the viewer becomes situated in the construction of meaning of the work and the installation.

TERMINATION PROCEDURES

The interruptions and diversions implied by the title *Where Were We* may refer as well to the gaps and disjunctions we negotiate throughout the exhibition. They invite a chain of symbols and meanings that must be sutured together, much like cinema as an experience is derived from a narrative space of successive, discrete images. Through constructed scenarios and mise-en-scènes, it requires us to synthesize our viewing experience as a coherent whole while remaining subconsciously aware of its fragmented visual and narrative elements. Another reminder of how Brannon's ongoing interest in cinema can be seen as influencing his entire body of work, the cinema as a metaphor may also describe the way we (mis)identify ourselves with the images presented to us. *Where Were We* is similarly an active textual space that takes the form of and reflects our anxieties about misrecognition and uncertainty of meaning. If our unconscious is truly structured like language, Brannon posits, much is to be revealed in the ways we read ourselves and our surroundings together.

Howie Chen

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998); originally published as *Les quatre concepts fundamenteaux de la psychoanalyse* (1973).
2. Brannon considers exhibitions' announcement materials discrete works in themselves that provide a space for both image and information. Matthew Brannon, interview by Roger White (*Brooklyn Rail*, April 2004).
3. The building is Renzo Piano's New York Times building, partially lit and still under construction, as it appears from Brannon's studio window.

4. "You don't have to watch the film to know the story. It's about sex, money, and power. It's about self-destructive impulses and fear. You don't have to watch the film to know the story." From the artist's statement for *The Unending Horrible*, Southfirst, Brooklyn, 2004.

5. This type of rhetorical device, using one medium of art to describe another as a way of illuminating the former, is known as "ecphrasis."

6. See Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); originally published as *Der Akt des Lesens* (1976).

MATTHEW BRANNON
BORN 1971, ST. MARIES, IDAHO
LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK

EDUCATION

1995 BA, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES
1999 MFA, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK

SELECTED EXHIBITION HISTORY
ONE-ARTIST EXHIBITIONS

2007 ART GALLERY OF YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO, *Try & Be Grateful*
2006 DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY AT ART 37 BASEL, *Shoegazers & Graverobbers*
FRIEDRICH PETZEL GALLERY, NEW YORK, *Cum Together*
2004 JOHN CONNELLY PRESENTS, NEW YORK, *Exhausted Blood & Imitation Salt*

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2007 OFFICE BAROQUE GALLERY, ANTWERP *On the Marriage Broker Joke*
2006 ASTRUP FEARNLEY MUSEET FOR MODERNE KUNST, OSLO, *Uncertain States of America: American Art in the Third Millennium*, traveled internationally
BADISCHER KUNSTVEREIN, KARLSRUHE, GERMANY, *Social Design*
ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS, LONDON, *USA Today*
UNITED ARTISTS, LTD., MARFA, TEXAS, *Matthew Brannon, Wade Guyton, Patrick Hill*
2005 P.S.1, LONG ISLAND CITY, NEW YORK, *Greater New York*
WHITE COLUMNS, NEW YORK, *Post No Bills*
2004 P.S.1, LONG ISLAND CITY, NEW YORK, *Collection (or How I Spent a Year)*
P.S.1, LONG ISLAND CITY, NEW YORK, *Curious Crystal of Unusual Purity*

All works are in the collection of the artist; courtesy Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York.
Photographs by Larry Seven, except *Sick Decisions* and *Grotesque Desperate*, by Noah Sheldon.

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Matthew Brannon: Where Were We*, **organized by Howie Chen, branch manager/senior curatorial coordinator, Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria. Brochure designed by Matthew Brannon**

ARTIST'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
My special thanks to Michelle Elzay, Howie Chen, and Alex Kasavin.

I would like to also thank James Hegge, Luther Davis, Konstantin Grab, Shamim M. Momin, Friedrich Petzel, Maureen Sarro, Sam Tsao, David Kordansky, Jay Battle, Nathaniel Davis, George Rush, Anton Chan at AMAX Printing, and Blue Ribbon Sushi.

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The Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria is funded by Altria Group, Inc.

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